

Papers in refereed journals

Ricci, C., & Magnani, S. (2006, December). Ontario,s turnaround program: Welcomed support or unwanted demoralizing insult? *Canadian and International Education*, 35(2). (28 pages)

Ontario's Turnaround Program: Welcomed Support or Unwanted Demoralizing Insult?

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Introduction

In introducing their intension of implementing legislation that prevents students who dropout of school before the age of eighteen from obtaining a driver's license, the Ministry of Education referred to it as an incentive; meanwhile, many of us referred to it as a senseless punishment. Similarly, as part of the Turnaround Teams program, the Ministry of Education refers to bullies who come into people's classrooms to intimidate teachers as "support workers." After reading an article in Orbit and a piece of propaganda put out by the Deputy Minister Ben Levin (2005) praising the program, and reviewing the Ontario Ministry of Education website Turnaround Teams Program (2005) website that describes and promotes the program, we felt that we needed to share a school's radically different perspective of the Turnaround Teams program.

The article we are referring to in Orbit is by Barry Pervin (2005) and is titled *Turning Around Student Achievement in Literacy*. In the article, Pervin says, "The Turnaround team program is a component of the Literacy and Numeracy strategy. Experienced teachers, principals and literacy experts provide tailored supports to 100 schools to help improve student achievement" (p. 39). Leaving aside the limitation of defining student achievement with students' performance on an EQAO test, as we will see, Magnani's school did not experience the Ministry's attempt at "tailored supports" as helpful, but as a demoralizing government interference. As Pervin (2005) correctly suggests, the Ontario provincial government is concerned that currently, less than 60 percent of students in grades 3 and 6 are achieving the provincial average. The government's goal is to have 75 percent reach it by 2008 (p. 39). As part

of the Ministry's intervention, teachers at Magnani's school did not feel supported but were intimidated, felt abused by the system and watched as the students' achievement regressed over a three year period. After three years under such duress, the Ministry could not turn the school around and began its next phase of schools throughout Ontario. Sadly, many people gave up on the school, the staff, the community, and on the children. This was a case of the political agenda versus moral imperative. As the Ministry's role concluded, the school's new principal and co-author of this paper, Sandy Magnani, felt a different approach to attacking the school's results would drive this dedicated staff. Within the first year, the school's scores increased dramatically, along with morale, student behaviour and staff collaboration.

Not surprisingly, the Ministry advertises its perceived successes with the Turnaround program, but neglects to mention the resulting failures. As well, we often hear the Ministry's version of the experience, but not the teachers and principals. This paper is an attempt to broaden the discussion and give voice to the voices that have been silenced. By voicing the concerns of the silenced, it attempts to present a more balanced view of what has been written about the Turnaround Program.

During his teaching career, Ricci had the good fortune of working with one principal and the bad fortune of working with another, and so can attest to the critical role a principal plays in driving the school's culture. Magnani is an instructional leader that believes that teaching, especially in inner city schools, needs to be a matter of the heart. Teachers who are employed in schools where children bring a variety of emotional baggage require a concrete understanding of the community and a grounded sense of hope and optimism.

We will present background information on an Ontario school that was involved in the Schools in Need of Extra Support (now called the Turnaround program), its plan of action, and a progress evaluation by a diagnostician as well as an independent auditor that includes the three year period before and the one year period when Magnani became part of the project. We will argue that top-down approach and large-scale testing is not effective and does not improve low-performing schools in a sustainable manner. We are going to offer our perspective on the program that Pervin (2005) defines as a success. He says,

Early results showed a clear pattern of improvement in reading performance among students. Of the first 29 schools to participate, 23 showed improved performance of 2 to 77% (average score increase was 33%) on the grade 3 EQAO reading test. (p. 40)

We would like to remind the reader of Eisner's (1998) profound statement where he says that, "it is perfectly possible for a school's faculty to raise test scores and at the same time to diminish the quality of education." We submit that our experience was such that the test scores were not raised and, in addition, the quality of the educational experience was greatly diminished. In the cases of schools where scores were raised, given our experience, we would argue in support of Eisner's position. Scores may have gone up but for how long, and at what cost to the staff, students and the community?

Background Information

This particular school faces many challenges: nearly twenty percent of the school population is living below the poverty line, forty percent are receiving Children's Aid support, and over forty-five percent are aboriginal (a group that continues to face systemic discriminatory

challenges). The school was chosen to be a part of the Turnaround program by the Ministry of Education because of its low EQAO scores over a three year period. When Magnani joined the school the program was at the end of its third year.

Part of the support offered by the Ministry included professional development, a large amount of funding and agents who evaluated the school's progress. To Magnani's surprise, after three years of intensive "support," the school's E.Q.A.O. results from 2001 to 2004 had gradually decreased in all areas, including reading which was the Ministry's thrust for the school.

As Magnani walked through the school for the first time, she found there was little student work displayed on the walls in the classes, and in the hallways, and in its place there was plenty of commercially-bought materials. In addition, she noticed that students in all classrooms were disruptive and that teachers were trying to manage a variety of behavioral issues and teach curriculum at the same time. Most classes were organized in rows, using paper and pencil tasks, and teacher-centred lessons. There was little student engagement beyond the behavioural issues which were apparent throughout the school. Teachers were somewhat cautious as she entered their room, leaving her to feel somewhat unwelcome, and given what they had been through with the Turnaround teams this is not surprising.

The exiting principal showed Magnani a room filled with bookcases of leveled readers which were purchased with part of the large grant the school received. She asked questions regarding process and data collection at the school and was told that the decision-making was done through a variety of external agents which included the Ministry team, a diagnostician, OISE students who used their own baselines and created the improvement plan and workshops.

Magnani's second meeting at the school was with a team of people representing the Ministry, and a diagnostician whose role it was to evaluate teacher practices and the school improvement over the three year period. She was informed that in the first year, the school had been re-vamped to follow a specific schedule focused on the Four Blocks approach with specific recommendations outlined by the diagnostician for teachers to follow. The staff received a great amount of professional development to focus on The Balanced Literacy Diet, delivered by an outside agent to the board. The Ministry team's goals were to implement best teaching practices to improve reading in the primary grades. Over a two year period, the workshops were to provide teachers with theoretical knowledge in reading at the various stages in children's literacy development. It was hoped that armed with this theory, better teaching practices would follow and student achievement would improve.

Unfortunately, the school had not demonstrated the improvements expected by the Ministry. In fact, the school's E.Q.A.O. scores actually dove to a new low in all areas, with less than twenty percent of students in grade three achieving level three results in reading, the provincial standard (EQAO, 2004). The diagnostician felt that the school did not progress and that the minimal amount of student work displayed continued to indicate low-level expectations. Students in grade three were decoding using phonemic awareness and had achieved basic level comprehension. The approach to teaching reading was seen as clinical rather than curriculum-focused. After three years of concentration on reading techniques, the diagnostician felt that greater attention needed to be given to student writing responses as they relate to EQAO assessment frameworks. The Ministry indicated that the staff had competing philosophies, that

recommendations (Bochar, 2003) outlined in the diagnostic report over the three years were not implemented, all of which were contributing factors resulting in poor student performance. The meeting ended with the agents representing the Ministry stating that their support with the school was going to diminish into the fourth year. Magnani told the team that she would be meeting with school staff to examine the Ministry's reports and recommendations, as well as the school's existing plan to complete a gap analysis so that they could make informed decisions about the state of the school. The diagnostician would re-visit the school in September to look at the planning process and again in June to evaluate the progress of the school in its fourth year.

Examination of the Process - The Beginning of the Journey

The meeting with the Ministry left Magnani feeling somewhat overwhelmed, wondering where the process had fallen apart for the school to improve. Magnani wondered why the team focused on the theory of teaching reading and excluded other components such as comprehension, curricular connections, and writing interconnections. This imbalance denied students access to the tools they needed to demonstrate their knowledge in a performance-based assessment framework and did not promote higher order thinking skills. Magnani did not find evidence of any type of gap analysis of the school's strengths and weaknesses in order to set targets and identify steps needed to move students forward. Magnani also did not get a sense of how the staff collaborated to accomplish this task in such a disadvantaged school. In Magnani's experience, she believed that for professional development to be effective, there must be concrete evidence of changes resulting from teacher dialogue and assessment for student learning. For change to take place and capacity building to occur, staff must work in developing a

diet for three years. The staff reported that the theory approach to reading did not give them strategies that were easily put into practice and many differing philosophies confused those who were looking for a consistent approach. Not surprisingly, this led to staff animosity and negativity about the improvement initiatives.

Many resources were purchased for the school in the form of leveled readers but only the two selected teachers chose the materials and these had to be kept in a central location and had to be signed-out, not convenient for teachers. The staff was told that they did not take professional development seriously and that they were resistant to the change. Clearly, the Ministry thugs blamed the teachers for the significant decline in student achievement. When the staff commented that they were stressed, that they felt an increase in their workload, that the theory and practices were not effective in improving student results, they were told that they were making inappropriate comments. Instead of listening to the staff's legitimate comments and using them to check progress, staff was ignored and told to get on board. Teachers felt that no leg work had been done by the members of the top-down team in order to create a culture for change and collaboration. Competent teachers who used to act as mentors to others on staff were now isolated in their classrooms and felt consciously incompetent as teachers. It is important for schools to create and foster the use of professional learning communities so teachers can talk about problems and concerns in a comfortable and non-threatening environment (Eisner, 1992; McLaughlin 1994).

Staff made it clear that the Ministry's role, as they perceived it, made them feel incompetent. Teachers felt demoralized as the Ministry examined day books, evaluated their

teaching and continuously questioned their effectiveness. Staff was concerned about the Ministry using their teacher's day book as a tool to evaluate the types of activities and concepts that teachers are incorporating in their daily literacy program. Not only did they feel that their privacy was invaded, but they understood the limitation of using a day book to evaluate the art of teaching. Teaching is not something written down but an enacted activity guided by long range plans. A new teacher who arrived at the school in the second year, did not initially realize the extent of the mandate and expressed the following:

When I came here, I was not quite sure what to expect. I just remember walking into the school seeing a lot of personal attacks, I was thrown with the wolves in a tense situation. I was not going to fall into that and welcomed the extra in-services. Well, my optimism left me quickly when the Ministry returned and their abrasive manner gave me a taste of what the rest of the staff suffered. Nothing was good enough - from our day books to our lesson plans to our classroom set up - the whole gamut. (Anonymous, 2003)

Another new staff member commented that nothing was in place to assist her to get on board and that she felt like an outcast. The encounter with the Ministry team set the stage for fear and animosity rather than a process to balance the needs, feelings, and anxieties of the teachers with the desire to implement change.

The Ministry needs to revise their procedures to include a more teacher-friendly approach which focuses on establishing a positive working relationship that is built on trust, honesty, and openness so that teachers understand the need for change while retaining their sense of self-efficacy and self-worth. If no attempt is made to gain teacher trust and support, it is likely that the

government funds and personal effort put forth to initiate, implement, and sustain educational change will result in a hostile school environment, where teachers are unhappy with school administration and are resistant to change (Eisner, 1992; Guskey, 2002; McLaughlin, 1991).

Teachers were unhappy with what they felt was strangers taking over their school, controlling and scrutinizing what happened within their classes. The teachers and the Ministry differed philosophically on many levels. For example, the Ministry required students to undergo a variety of standardized tests which were used for baseline, and the teachers felt that the data currently used by the school would have achieved a baseline without intruding on student learning by using more student diagnostic testing. Teachers in the school felt that staff morale was low and that staff cohesion was non-existent, making it impossible to establish a support network together. Furthermore, this unfriendly environment made it impossible for them to create professional learning teams. Staff felt no effort was made to increase their motivation, not even by each other. In a core school when a teacher already works hard every day, how can the Ministry mandate that teachers write expectations for each block of time, adding to the workload?

Teachers believed that change needed to occur to improve student success at the school, but in the survey they all said that the wrong approach was taken at all levels. It was difficult for teachers to embrace change when it was forced upon them in such a combative way. They revealed how it created an environment where it was difficult for them to put their heart and soul into it. One teacher wrote, "It's like an alcoholic. He can be forced to stop drinking but will go back to drinking the minute you're gone. A person has to recognize that he is an alcoholic and he

must want to help himself. He must see the benefits of doing it before he can go to Alcoholics Anonymous on his own. So, our staff was the alcoholics forced into rehabilitation, so to speak” (Anonymous, 2003).

So, how does large-scale accountability on a school with less advantaged children achieve anything other than demeaning the whole school community by broadcasting EQAO results publicly? This experience highlights how the top-down approach does not improve student learning and that placing added pressure on a staff that is already committed to helping a disadvantaged school achieves no positive outcomes.

Collaborative Effort and Learning Communities

Through the top-down approach, policy makers have forgotten the critical role of the teaching profession in the development and implementation of policies. In order for educators to commit to an improvement plan, they must be involved in the process through a collaborative approach in the change process. Teachers need to be involved in analyzing assessment results so they better understand how to address student problems revealed in the data. When teachers analyze data together, multiple explanations through a team dialogue of a student’s difficulty can equip teachers with a variety of strategies. Professional learning communities work best when teachers within a school work together to share best practices to improve student results. Instead of a top-down approach, we need to give teachers quality time to work together to examine policies, curriculum and share best practices to assist each other.

Improving Less Advantaged Schools

Teachers in less advantaged schools are expected to implement district initiated policies as well as those of the Turnaround Teams. The school has no control or input into much of anything but is made to implement programs that are flawed and then made accountable for the failures. It is difficult for schools to embrace top-down mandated policies; especially, those of Turnaround Teams where the main data used to inform their decisions have been EQAO results to pinpoint failing schools.

Many reports proclaimed the success of Turnaround Schools and claimed that that the Ministry's team approach supported staff and improved the school culture. Fullan states that through the Turnaround Schools project, "improvements do occur, and that school staff members take pride in the results because changes were not forced on them" (cited in Pervin, 2005, p.40). If the intent of the Turnaround Schools was to build greater capacity in schools through the effort of the whole community, it failed to attain this goal for Magnani's school where she witnessed much teacher suffering and a school where low morale took over people's spirits and hope for change. It would be interesting to see how many of the Turnaround Schools continue to improve after a short phase of support from the Ministry. Elmore (2003) makes it clear that "turning around failing schools, in other words, is not the same as improving them" (p.10).

Research using numerous studies has proven that the community setting has an impact on child development and student learning. Holloway (2004) suggests that,

Improvement in student achievement will be limited if reform efforts focus solely on students in the classroom... policy makers must also look at the broader picture. They

must consider how to increase the community's capacity to support its children and youth so that students' experiences outside school will enhance the teaching and learning that goes on inside the school. (p.90)

If the Ministry analyzed the Turnaround Schools data in depth, it would realize that these low-performing schools need a more holistic approach. Greater attention needs to be dedicated to the social and psychological obstacles faced by the students. The poverty rate, the domestic abuse, the drug abuse all result in major social and psychological implications which affect the school in varying stages each and every day. Until these needs are met, it is difficult for many students to come to school and be engaged when their home situations linger in their minds throughout the school day; Maslow's hierarchy of needs.

Large-Scale Testing and Target-Oriented Mandates for Improvement

When teams move directly from data analysis to quick fix workshops, three assumptions are made: All low-performing students are struggling in the same way, that the same strategy will work for all students, and that all teachers need the same professional development. The over-generalization in uniform instructional practices without taking the time to study our students in depth explains why school improvement efforts fail. Performance-based accountability blames teachers for the schools low-performance. This is unfair and educators in low-performing schools have a lot to offer their high-performing colleagues about the processes of instruction, assessment, inclusive cultures, and the daily management of the various students' needs.

Contrary to popular myth, high-performing schools do not necessarily have the best teachers. We need to consider that the students in high-performing schools come with the necessary skills that

many disadvantaged children don't.

Another problem with performance-based accountability systems is that it is a linear process, yet dealing with humans requires a non-linear one. When the Ministry sets the target at seventy five percent, Turnaround Schools have to raise the bar in an effort to reach this expectation. These schools now have to compete against schools that are already doing well and make progress against a continually increasing gradient of performance. The Ministry sets an arbitrary target of seventy five percent and the schools are expected to reach it. The processes to improve, change, implement, and review does not occur in equal increments each year. These province-wide blanketed targets will only assist in labeling more schools as failing, causing negative perceptions about educators and the members within the school community yet again. The most disturbing piece of this system is that they not only ignore but undervalue the struggles of people like those who work in schools like Magnani's all over Ontario, the United States and the world.

Final Diagnostic Report - Research, Grounded Hope, and a Collaborative Culture

In March 2005, the Ministry Turnaround Team and diagnostician returned to complete their last evaluation of the school. By this time Magnani had worked with the staff for seven consecutive months. An independent survey was administered to staff by an outside agent that was neutral to the school and the Ministry, giving both the school and the Ministry feedback. Below are some of the statements made in the diagnostic report of how the school climate improved and how the staff worked collaboratively as a learning community when the pressure from the Turnaround team was removed :

Leadership: Staff indicated that the current principal had provided excellent in-service and had been a catalyst in the development and implementation of the school improvement plan.

School Culture, Teacher Attitudes, and Beliefs: Staff indicated that the culture of the school now promotes staff supporting each other and believing that their students can be successful through appropriate programming. There has been a greater cohesion in the delivery of curriculum. Teachers feel confident in their instructional practices. Teachers cited many obstacles prior to this year with the Ministry having a great impact on low teacher morale.

Standards and Targets: Through the current principal's efforts, staff has to come to the realization that its practices did not reflect what was needed to demonstrate success in student learning as per the standards in EQAO.

Monitoring and Assessment: Staff did not "buy into" the Ministry's approach and felt that there were too many classroom management issues during the three year process.

Classroom Teaching Practices: With the new administrator, staff have used the Four Blocks by incorporating cross-curricular connections as part of the program delivery. Staff reported that they now emphasize vocabulary development as well as the development of higher order thinking skills.

Professional Learning Teams: The current principal has organized monthly study groups where teachers have been focusing on specific topics and shared their learning and insights with others on staff. The staff have also worked together to make cross-curricular bins using the new resources.

School and Class Organization: Meetings with the director of education for the board has

assisted compensatory schools. The school has received additional staffing in order to reduce class sizes in the primary classes as well as a part time early intervention teacher to close the gap of struggling students. The current principal has also re-organized primary classes with resources in a central location as well as added to in-class resources. With smaller classes, teachers have been able to better meet the various needs and have evidence that students are now improving.

Support Programs - Special Education: The current principal has been assertive in accessing Educational Assistants to meet the needs of struggling and at-risk students.

Home, School and Community Partnerships: This is an area that staff has focused on since the beginning of the program. Classrooms have “Read at Home” programs. The current principal has introduced early identification of Kindergarten students prior to entering school through the speech and language agency, the teacher=s pre-evaluation of students and a workshop for parents in Kindergarten with a Take-Home@package to assist pre-Kindergarten students. The school advertises the numerous programs the public library offers walking distance to the school. The school has begun to be more assertive at recruiting volunteers and have set up a partnership with Brantford Laurier as well as the high schools’ cooperative programs.

Gender, Demographics and Language: Staff has reported that the school population is one of the areas in Brantford with a high level of poverty, poorly educated parents, a large CAS involvement and a significant aboriginal population. The members of the community experience oppression which has resulted in poor living conditions, low education levels, mental health, and domestic violence. Hot snacks are provided two to three times a week by a small group of parent volunteers.

The diagnostician concluded her report (Bochar, 2005) stating that it is evident that there has been a change in focus in the standards of practice. The staff has articulated that the Ministry's presence impeded improvement but felt that the current leader has renewed the staff commitment to re-initiate the change process based on a more consistent messaging system and greater focus on a more balanced approach to the delivery of the Four blocks framework. Staff feel that the school improvement plan is now a living document that is used as a tool to address and monitor classroom practice. The weekly staff news includes items from the school plan and staff meetings include aspects of the plan for discussion and implementation. Staff now understand the problems in the community but do not use these as a tool for excusing failure but now focus on support systems to make sure that no child fails them and that they continue to improve to equip the students for life.

Attaining and Sustaining Improvement - Research Evidence

The principal's role is to create a school that is safe and orderly, promoting a culture of collegiality, and high expectations. When the Ministry became involved with the school, Magnani "felt as if the exact opposite occurred, along with emotional exhaustion amongst staff and a sense of hopelessness."

Ruth Sutton (2005) has used her philosophy that assessment for learning improves student learning, not just performance. She used this theory accompanied by a collaborative culture to prove that inner city districts anywhere in the world can be successful. Sutton assisted a Winnipeg Inner City District become successful through a collaborative change process. Sutton encouraged risk-taking, not compliance, provided support for teachers through the

collaborative team approach lead by the principal, impressing upon the staff that they were the internal agents who would assist students improve. Sutton says:

Assessment of learning checks learning to date, its audience is beyond the classroom, it is periodic, uses numbers, scores and grades, it is criterion/standards referenced, and does not involve the learner in the process. Assessment for learning, on the other hand, suggests next learning, its audience is teachers and learners, it is continual, has specific feedback, uses words not scores, it is self-referenced, and must involve the learner - the person most able to improve learning (2005).

Elmore's [2005] ASCD conference presentation announced clearly that,

Improvement is a developmental process, not an act of compliance with policy. Schools get better by engaging collectively in the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, not by trying to figure out what policymakers want and doing it... not a simple, linear trajectory, as models of external accountability would seem to suggest... accountability measures that penalize schools for failing to improve at a constant, and arbitrary rate simply wind up making it harder for them to sustain and build on their accomplishments.

Elmore (2005) mirrors Sutton's (2005) beliefs that changes in instructional practices and student learning requires a process that includes students, teachers, and support staff. Elmore (2005) states that the principle of reciprocity needs to occur between the system's demands on schools and their accountability to that failure. State systems and provincial systems must accept joint responsibility of performance based results in failing schools as these systems are the co-producers of that capacity.

The results in many research studies have proven that the solutions to improving education lie inside the schoolhouse (Mintrop, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Barth, 1990). Teachers in core schools take on extra responsibilities that affluent schools cannot even begin to visualize. The teachers and the administrator in less advantaged schools provide moral leadership to raise student achievement, reduce the gap and build proud, engaged students to prepare them for life.

Magnani's Journey - Lessons For All System Levels

In my journey at a core school suffering from the label of failure, it has been imperative that I continue to have hope and optimism as we work together to provide a productive school environment. There are important lessons to be learned by principals who want to make sustainable changes in their schools without destroying its culture. No matter the type of school a principal manages, there are key components to the role that need to be in place so that staff collaboration occurs during the change process.

In my situation, my first step was to understand the current culture in order to understand the values and beliefs my teachers held at hand. As part of the team, it was also important that I share with the staff my values and my philosophies. Principals need to remember that their job is to assist staff in their building in order to improve student achievement. Teachers in my school know that no decision will be made until we have decided as a team how our actions will benefit the students. I promote a collaborative culture where staff work together to find gaps so that we can work together to share ideas to move students forward.

Staff perceptions of the three year program, prior to my arrival, was that the school was under surveillance of the Ministry of Education of Ontario. Teachers were told that the professional development offered was optional but then were required to participate. Teachers viewed the professional development as imposed on them by sources external to the school, defining this as the "deficit" model of professional development (Huberman & Huskey, 1995), associated with passive attitudes towards the process of professional development. Staff did not feel a collaborative culture existed throughout the whole process, yet again proving that collaboration is a key component of effective professional development.

From Hargreaves, I have learned that collaborative culture can lead to many great things in a school. His philosophy has allowed me to understand the power of a collaborative culture and how it assists teachers in a school. Turnaround Teams cannot be successful if they do not take the time to work with the staff who will implement the change process.

"Collaboration creates moral support, increased efficiency, improved effectiveness, reduced workload, synchronized time perspective, situated certainty, political assertiveness, increased capacity for reflection, organizational responsiveness, opportunities to learn, and continuous improvement" (Hargreaves, 2005, ASCD speech). Hargreaves reinforces the point that collaborative culture helps teachers build on existing expertise, pool resources, provide moral support and create a climate of trust, confront problems and celebrate successes, deal with complex and unanticipated problems, and become empowered. As a new principal, I began my journey with creating a collaborative culture in order to move to the next level, professional learning communities.

It is important to understand that a collaborative culture is different from a professional learning community. A professional learning community needs a culture of collaboration in order to exist but it has key factors that drive its goal. Through a collaborative team approach, teachers focus on achievement and engagement of students in their schools or districts. The focus of learning and teaching uses evidence to change processes, allows for sharing of ideas by the group, and then collates best practices in order to inform programming. The group can then learn from one another, reflects upon practices and reviews its plan in order to have continual improvement. As teachers become comfortable with assessment for learning, students will be successful in school as they too understand their own learning processes. One fact remains which we all tend to forget - all students can and will learn, may not start process at the same place, nor learn at the same pace, and may not achieve ultimate expectations. Learning does not happen because adults demand it, students will learn because they want to learn and see their learning as essential for themselves. We know that system-wide policies and targets cannot promote an effective assessment framework to improve a school. To be effective, schools must be in charge of their own journeys, enabling them to assess the students for learning. Growth can only occur when students and teachers are both informed using proper assessment strategies. When students are assessed appropriately and needs accommodated, instruction and learning will ultimately improve.

Instead of a collaborative approach, the Ministry transfers knowledge rather than transforms it, they impose requirements rather than use shared inquiry, their focus is result-driven not evidence informed, they use standardized approaches rather than allow local

solutions, they use an authoritarian rather than a collaborative approach, they download intensive training rather than support continuous learning, and they use performance-based results rather than best practices within its community. When the State or Ontario systems look for teams to assist failing schools, they should look for people in what Elmore called “improving schools, not in nominally successful schools, because a large number of successful schools are not improving schools . . . Schools have failed but so too can accountability systems” (Elmore, 2005, ASCD speech).

In trying to find ways to improve the school, no one from the Turnround Teams could answer three key questions, all of which stem from Dufour (2004, p.8). What do we want our students to learn? How will we know when they have learned it? What will we do when they have not?

Conclusion

Schools in Ontario want a sustainable school improvement plan to obtain student success. With so many large-scale, top-down reforms, schools have lost their way in their search for the perfect school. Magnani’s school, like many schools in the United States and in Ontario, was spotted on the radar as a failing school since its standardized test results were not improving. It would seem that the large amount of money invested in the school for professional development and resources would be the ideal conditions required to achieve school success. To everyone’s dismay, there was no improvements and instead a twenty percent decrease in EQAO results. We seem to have a parallel experience to that of New Jersey where,

The state takeover ... with politically imposed outsider who lacked roots or credibility in

the community. .. The bureaucratic character of the state takeover process was reflected in an unhealthy mix of cynicism, anger, and anxiety on the part of the locals... Efforts to standardize curriculum and instructional practices proliferated in a top-down fashion. The low test scores, which helped precipitate the takeover, reflected deeply rooted education and social problems that neither the state nor its new curriculum could easily solve. No Child Left Behind, unattainable AYP formulas have swamped the district's progress (Karp, 2005, p.30).

From this data arose a court case where the New Jersey court rules that:

The state's system of school funding had denied children in the state's urban areas equal access to the thorough and efficient education that the state constitution guaranteed, and it was the state's obligation to redress this inequality... The court ordered the state to raise the spending level of its poorest districts to the level of its richest and most successful schools. (Karp, 2005, p.30)

In Ontario, the Ministry's top-down approach draws heavily on external ideas and personnel instead of the school's learning community to drive the change process towards improvement. When a staff works collaboratively as a learning community, their sense of hope and optimism brings out the best in everyone in the school. Currently, the staff of this particular school understands the community's needs, works together to find the school's weaknesses, plans together to improve and supports each other in the process. In one year, the team effort of a school community raised its grade 3 and 6 EQAO results significantly. In reading, the grade 3 results went from 14% to 57 % and grade 6 results from 9% to 36% achieving level 3 or 4. In

writing, the grade 3 results went from 21% to 43% and grade 6 results from 21% to 36% achieving level 3 or 4. In Math, the grade 3 results went from 18% to 61% and grade 6 results from 12% to 46% achieving level 3 or 4. Unfortunately, the Ministry does not announce improvement rates which still places the school below the provincial average.

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